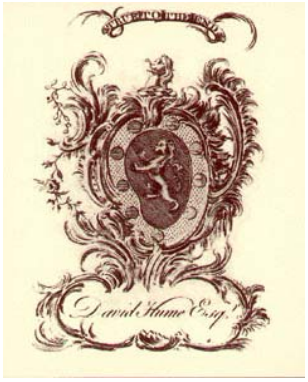

Hume's Difficulties with the Self
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HUME'S DIFFICULTIES WITH THE SELF

I

One of the more baffling and apparently inconclusive parts of the Treatise is the section on personal identity. Hume himself, when he takes a backward glance at it in those notorious passages in the Appendix, singles it out as representing an unresolved problem in his philosophy.

It is a matter of fairly general agreement among recent writers on the subject that one of Hume's chief difficulties -- though not one he recognizes -- is his assigning to the mind (or, sometimes, the "imagination") certain activities, which he claims are instrumental in generating belief in, and awareness of, the very mind or self whose activities they are said to be.[1] Hume talks about customs and habits of the mind and the expectations arising out of these, of the acts of observing, noticing and associating, of believing, of feigning, and so on, acts which the mind is required to perform in order for us to be able to explain along acceptable empiricist lines how the idea of an abiding self arises. Such talk, it seems, already presupposes the existence of a self and our possession of the idea thereof. So does, of course, the talk involved in Hume's accounts of the external world and of causality. Insofar as these involve his theory of belief, they, too, seem to presuppose a self which is more than a fiction, more than a product of the imagination. Yet the account he gives of the self seems to yield precisely a fiction in just the sense in which our ideas of the external world and of its causal connections are ideas of fictions. Quite generally, then, if Hume's theory of belief presupposes a continually existing self, what sense can be made of his arguments to show that our belief in such a self is the belief in a fiction?

I want to argue that Hume can be defended against such criticisms and that the appearance of circularity here is just that: an appearance. It results largely from

two features of the Treatise. The first is that since at different points in the Treatise Hume is obviously concerned with different problems, his language reflects this. It is for this reason only that at times he talks in ways which make it seem that a continually existing self is being presupposed. The second feature responsible for the appearance of circularity is that while Hume draws a distinction between "perfect" and "imperfect" identity, he fails to make that distinction explicit enough, so that one may easily miss the all-important point that it is only the former sort of identity which is being denied of the self, and the latter sort which is being explained and accounted for along Humean empiricist lines. If we keep this in mind, we shall see that the references in his account of the identity of the self to the activities of the self are not question-begging, and that the attribution of these activities to the very same "fiction" whose existence is being accounted for carries no absurdity.

II

One way to bring out the differences between the kind of self which is alleged to be presupposed by Hume's account and that which, as I shall argue, is really involved in that account, is to put pressure on Hume's doctrine of association. It is frequently urged by commentators[2] that the notion of association which is so fundamental for much of Hume's philosophy is ambiguous, showing as it does the influence of two very different models, deriving from Hutcheson and Newton respectively. On the first model, a continuing self is presupposed as the agent of the various sorts of associative acts he invokes; on the second it is the items associated (perceptions) which are themselves the entities doing the associating. Clearly, the question whether Hume's theory of belief involves the assumption that a continuing self exists (harmless in the uses of that

theory in other contexts, but possibly fatal in its use in a theory of personal identity) may be seen to resolve into the question, which model of association is fundamental for Hume?

It is, of course, an undeniable fact that Hume talks of association in two radically different ways. On the one hand, he talks of the mind (and of the imagination) as "associating perceptions," as "noticing" or "observing" resemblances and other relations, and as developing "customs" and "expectations" -- apparently, the Hutchesonian view. On the other hand, he speaks of impressions and ideas themselves as "attracting" and "introducing" each other, as "falling regularly into complex ones" and so on -- the Newtonian, or "gravitational," picture.

Is Hume, however, really committed to two different accounts of association? Is there, in the Treatise, at least, as Jane McIntyre claims, "a tension between two different implicit accounts of the association of ideas"?[3] Not, it seems to me, if we remember that the heart of Hume's theory of the self is precisely the claim that the mind is nothing but a collection of perceptions (organized in certain ways). Then, surely, locutions of the sort "the mind associates" cannot be taken at face value as implying the Hutchesonian view -- in fact, Hume seems to be saying something rather closer to the Newtonian one. Only if we overlook or forget this will we think that Hume wants to say both that the mind is merely a collection of perceptions associated with each other in certain ways and also that there is an enduring self to which the functions involved in the notions of habit, custom, etc., are to be assigned. That would lead to an impasse from which there could be no escape. Hume certainly asserts, and argues for, the first of these propositions. He nowhere asserts the second: the passages that trouble McIntyre and others, where he talks about the mind as associating perceptions, appear to imply it only if we forget that by "the mind" in such

places we are to understand precisely a collection of perceptions. Of course, some of these passages occur before Hume makes this clear in the section on personal identity. But in those earlier contexts where Hume adopts this way of speaking, he does not need to address the present issue and can afford to leave uninvestigated the nature of the entity called "mind" or "imagination", whose activity he alleges to be the source of certain beliefs (e.g., in causal connections or in the external world): it would be merely distracting to introduce these further complications at such points. We should not make the mistake of regarding Hume, because of the discretion he shows in postponing coming to grips with this question, as being committed to just the view of the mind that, when he does come to address the topic, he firmly and unequivocally rejects. What Hume wants to say is precisely that the mind, understood as a bundle of directly associated perceptions, is the entity to which those crucial activities his talk of custom and habit involves are to be assigned. Now this leaves Hume with the difficult task of making sense of such a strange-seeming claim and of explaining how it can be true. But this is a different difficulty from the so-called "fundamental difficulty" alleged by his recent critics; that "difficulty" evaporates once we cease trying to saddle Hume with an inconsistency arising out of regarding him as at least vestigially committed to the very view of the self he is plainly concerned to reject.

III

I can sketch only in the barest outline what I take to be Hume's solution to the real difficulty which I have suggested remains for him. Hume gives its essence very directly and boldly: *As memory alone acquaints us with the...succession of perceptions, 'tis to be consider'd, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal*

identity. Had we no memory, we never shou'd have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person. (T261-2)[4] It is memory, or, to be more specific, the presence of memory perceptions among the series of collections of perceptions, that, on Hume's view, is the mind or self, which makes it possible for such a series to be a self, a single entity which can be individuated, and of which that self can be aware.[5] Let me single out two aspects of the difficulty facing Hume in attempting to make intelligible his claim that (collections of) perceptions are the agents of those activities he assigns to the self or imagination. First, how can one make sense of distinct perceptions attracting each other directly in the manner required by the Newtonian or "gravitational" model of association? While I have a suspicion that the task of unpacking the metaphors involved is well-nigh hopeless, it may be suggested that one way in which a perception may point in the direction of another is by being a memory of the latter.[6] The intentionality of memories (as well as that of anticipations) may be just the bond required for cementing perceptions without the aid of an additional agency such as a mind whose perceptions, on the alternative model, they would be said to be. The second problematic aspect of Hume's task we should note is the need to explain our awareness that some perceptions are associated in this direct way; that is, to account for self-consciousness on such a Newtonian theory. Perceptions are, by definition, items of consciousness, and even when the answer to the question, Items of whose consciousness? turns out to be as paradoxical-seeming as Hume's, the dissolution of the paradox cannot involve denying or ignoring the phenomenological fact that the bundle of perceptions which is the self is aware of itself as such a bundle constituting such a unity. But there is nothing mysterious about this, if some of these items are essentially intentional in character in the way that memories are -- and

this, I suggest, is what Hume has in mind when he talks of memory discovering as well as producing self-identity (T262).[7]

So we can see that Hume's insistence on the centrality of memory in any account of self-identity and the gravitational model of association go hand in hand -- another reason for not taking Hume to be committed to another, plainly conflicting, model of association as well.

Nor could an overlap-theory of the ingenious sort suggested by McIntyre solve the "fundamental difficulty", if there really were one.[8] According to this suggestion, as long as the set of perceptions at time t and the set at time t_1 have some members in common, the continuity required for the identity of a self is provided, in spite of the strict non-identity of the sets. And the set at t_2 need have a member in common only with the set at t_1, and not with that at t, in order for t and t_2 to be identical in this weak - but, as McIntyre claims, Humean -- sense. But it is hard to see why the presence of hold-over perceptions in successive collections should be thought to be of help in making sense of the attribution of imaginative activity, custom and habit to the series of such collections which it serves, on such a view, to unify. If it were true, as McIntyre insists, that for Hume "the self is not identical through time,"[9] why should the fact that there is some component common to a succession of strictly diverse sets of perceptions (even a component which is itself strictly identical through time) be thought to help to make sense of and justify talk of habit and imaginative activity? Surely, we would still have the puzzle of what entity it is whose habit, etc., is being invoked? Is it one of these sets, all of them somehow, or just the common components linking (sets of) these sets? Would it make sense to opt for any one of these answers?

The source of the trouble is, it seems to me, the refusal shared by most of Hume's critics to take seriously

enough his distinction between perfect (also called by him "strict" or "proper") identity and imperfect identity. Ashley and Stack have argued, to my mind persuasively, that this refusal is a mistake, and I will not pursue the matter here beyond saying that if the set of the sets of perceptions at $t...t_n$ may be seen as constituting a self with imperfect identity, there is no need for McIntyre's maneuvre of including perceptions common to several of the member-sets.[10] The imperfect identity of the set of these sets that is the self does not depend on the perfect identity of any perception, even in McIntyre's restricted sense. Thus, if we take the distinction between perfect and imperfect identity seriously, we need not deny ourselves the luxury of saying, consistent with ordinary usage and our common-sense beliefs, that we are, though strictly speaking different from moment to moment, nevertheless the same at those different moments; that there is one identical self which is constituted by a series of diverse collections of perceptions, and that it is this one self whose habits and imaginative activities are at work in generating its beliefs in an external world, its material objects and its causal connections. In advancing his account, Hume is not really committed to the paradoxical-seeming view that perceptions themselves as such can perceive, remember, compare, anticipate, etc. What he says is that people (minds) do all these things and then goes on to tell us what minds are. There is no more (though perhaps no less) mystery here than in saying that chairs are collections of particles. Having said this, nothing forces us to abandon our common-sense belief, reflected in ordinary language, that when we sit down we sit on a chair and not just on particles.

IV

The second aspect, as noted above, of the task facing Hume in making sense of a self based on a Newtonian model of association is that of giving some account of self-awareness. McNabb ends his discussion of the topic of personal identity with the question, "But still, what is it for

a perception to be aware of itself as a member of that relational unity of perceptions we call a mind?"[11] Even for Nelson Pike, there remains at the end of his defence of Hume's theory the difficulty of how, if the mind is just a bundle or series of conscious states, it can be aware of itself as such a bundle or series possessing a certain unity. McNabb confesses to having no answer. Pike offers an ingenious one which goes at least part of the way to solving the difficulty: "A series of conscious states cannot be aware of itself as a series. But a series of conscious states might contain an awareness which is of itself presented as a series."[12]

The solution I want to urge should now be clear. We should not say that a perception (for Pike, a "conscious state") is aware of the identity of the series (the self) which it partially constitutes; rather, we should say that the self is aware of its identity just because it contains a certain kind of perception. The perceptions which can fulfill this peculiar function are just those which possess the intentionality characteristic of memory, hence Hume's insistence on their centrality to any account of self-identity.[13] It is such perceptions which provide the glue uniting the diverse perceptions of a mind or self, that bond between strictly distinct existences for which Hume asks despairingly in the Appendix (T636).[14] He need not have despaired, however, had he realized that he himself had already provided at least the basis of a way out of the apparent dilemma, when in the very same passages of the Appendix he speaks of our "feeling" a connection between ideas of his error in formerly supposing that force and vivacity were the only properties in respect of which ideas with the same content *(of the same object)* could differ, rather than, as he now realizes, also *by their different feeling*; and, finally, of differences in feeling as including *differences among ideas, which cannot properly be comprehended under the terms "force" and "vivacity"* (T636).[15]

In all these ways he had already opened the way to including intentionality among these differences in feeling and to connecting his specific insight concerning the central role of memory in self-awareness with these general revisions in the Appendix of the overly restrictive earlier parts of the Treatise. All the materials are there for a solution of the alleged difficulties; it is surprising that neither Hume nor his commentators have made full use of them.

If the interpretation I have urged is anywhere near the mark, it is easy to see why the allegation of circularity, of relying on a fictional self to explain the production of fictions, fails to hold for Hume. The self which on his account produces fictions is a very real one, though one composed of nothing but perceptions. In particular, it does not include, in addition to those perceptions, a continuing self possessing perfect identity. It is the latter that is fictional, and Hume is able to explain how it is that we come to believe in such a fiction. But for this explanation, as well as for the explanation of other beliefs in other fictions, only the imperfectly identical and very real self which consists of an organized set of perceptions is required.[16]

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1. See D. G. C. McNabb, David Hume, (Connecticut, 1951), esp. pp. 146-152; J. Passmore Hume's Intentions (New York, 1952), esp. pp. 77-83; Wade L. Robison, "Hume on Personal Identity," Journal of the History of Philosophy, vol. XII (1974), pp. 181-193; Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited," Dialogue, vol. XIV (1975), pp. 389-409. A defence of Hume against this criticism, not dissimilar to the one presented here (though without the emphasis on the role of memory and the solution it offers to the problem of self-awareness) is to be found in Nelson Pike's "Hume's Bundle Theory of the Self: A Limited Defence," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 4, (1967), pp. 159-165.

2. See Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume, (London, 1960), esp. pp. 73-76, also pp. 254-6; Jane L. McIntyre, "Is Hume's Self Consistent?" (Forthcoming in McGill Hume Studies).

3. McIntyre, pp. 00.

4. See also Green & Grose (hereafter GG), vol. 1, p.542.

5. On the question of whether the self and the mind are the same for Hume, see Penelhum, p. 398, and J. I. Biro, "Hume on Self-Identity and Memory," The Review of Metaphysics, vol. XXX (1976), pp. 19-38 (esp. 27-8).

6. For a fuller discussion of this intentionality of memory and the role it plays in Hume's theory of the self, see Biro, pp. 29-33.

7. See also GG, vol. 1, pp. 542-3.

8. McIntyre, pp. 00.

9. McIntyre, pp. 00. (Because she takes "identity" to mean "perfect" or "strict" identity.)

10. L. Ashley and M. Stack, "Hume's Theory of the Self and Its Identity," Dialogue, vol. XIII (1974), pp. 239-254.

11. McNabb, p. 152. Compare Kemp Smith, on Hume's difficulty in the Appendix (op. cit., p. 73): "The complex, he there recognizes [as the mind], is not merely itself complex, but is apprehended as complex, and any explanation that refers only to its constituents and to the associative agency through which they are assembled, is ignoring factors which are not to be so accounted for."

12. Pike, p. 165.

13. Almost equally important, though Hume does not seem to recognize this, is the intentionality of future-oriented perceptions of the sort we call "anticipations" and "intentions."

14. See also GG, p. 559.

15. Ibid.

16. I am indebted to Monte Cook and Kenneth Merrill for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.